

Fishery Interactions

The STAC recognized the general lack of observer coverage data throughout many of North Carolina commercial fisheries, and the importance of having accurate real time data for the management of fisheries and reduction of bycatch. Currently, the NCDMF has an estuarine observer program throughout all estuarine waters. The program was established in April 2004, and has obtained coverage (~1.5% of total trips - 11% of fall fishery in PSGNRA) throughout the estuarine large and small mesh gillnet fisheries. The NCDMF observer program is now beginning to expand into the Shrimp Trawl, Pound Net, and Crab Trawl fisheries. Funding for this program exists through September 2006 with allocated funds, and is under a grant agreement, which may re-allocate funds through September 2007.

The NMFS observer program in North Carolina is primarily tasked with obtaining trips in commercial trawler and gillnet fisheries (Category I and Category II) as allocated on the Northeast Fishery Observer Program (NEFOP) sea day schedule by month and county. Categories I and II fisheries are classified by NOAA Fisheries based on the level of serious injury and mortality of marine mammals occurring incidentally in each fishery. The majority of days that are tasked in North Carolina are for Dare County, North Carolina in the commercial ocean gillnet fishery. However, the NEFOP does occasionally obtain estuarine gillnet trips in Pamlico Sound, NC.

The STAC recommended that state exploratory observer coverage with a minimum goal of 2% coverage of the total fishing effort (by fishery) be expanded to all gears of primary and other concern fisheries, and that NCDMF search for long-term funding for this program. The STAC further recommended that observer coverage be administered fairly to all fishermen. Finally, the STAC recommended that alternative methods for obtaining sea turtle interaction information from recreational fisheries be explored.

The STAC also recognized other specific research needs. There was considerable discussion regarding the ultimate fate of sea turtles following post-capture release and multiple captures in commercial fishing gears. **Although beyond the scope of the original mandate, the STAC recommended funding for studies directed at post-capture mortality. Similarly, the STAC recommended expanding independent socio-economic studies relating to sea turtle management.**

Gear Development

The STAC recognized the need to continue gear development programs throughout North Carolina fisheries for the purpose of developing commercial fishing gears that maintain target catches while reducing bycatch. Currently, the North Carolina Sea Grant Fishery Resource Grant Program, the Blue Crab Program (hurricane funding), and the NCDMF gear development programs are tasked with this goal. **The STAC recommended continued support and funding for these programs. The STAC also recommended directed research to identify fishing gear that reduces if not eliminates sea turtle interactions, for example:**

- Gillnet fishery – large mesh low-profile gillnet design expansion studies
- Shrimp Trawl fishery – continued TED design studies
- Pound Net fishery – escape panel and turtle deflector grid studies
- Rod and Reel (Recreational) – circle hook studies
- Crab Pot fishery – research directed to identify sea turtle impacts to crab pot gear